RPG Reload Developer Spotlight 001 – Josh Presseisen from Crescent Moon Games

October 6, 2016 by Shaun Musgrave

As mentioned in last month's **RPG Reload** roadmap, we're going to be taking one column out of every month to interview some of the developers and publishers behind some of our favorite games. The aim here is for you readers to get a sense of the person, so the tone is more conversational than we usually use in interviews here at TouchArcade. It's also not necessarily about the games themselves, either. Basically, we'll kick off and see where the conversation takes us. To start this series, Josh Presseisen from Crescent Moon Games has graciously agreed to be the guinea pig. Crescent Moon is perhaps most famous for the *Ravensword* ($6.99) series of RPGs, but they publish all kinds of games, including the recent *Legend of the Skyfish* ($3.99) and *Atomic Super Lander* ($2.99).
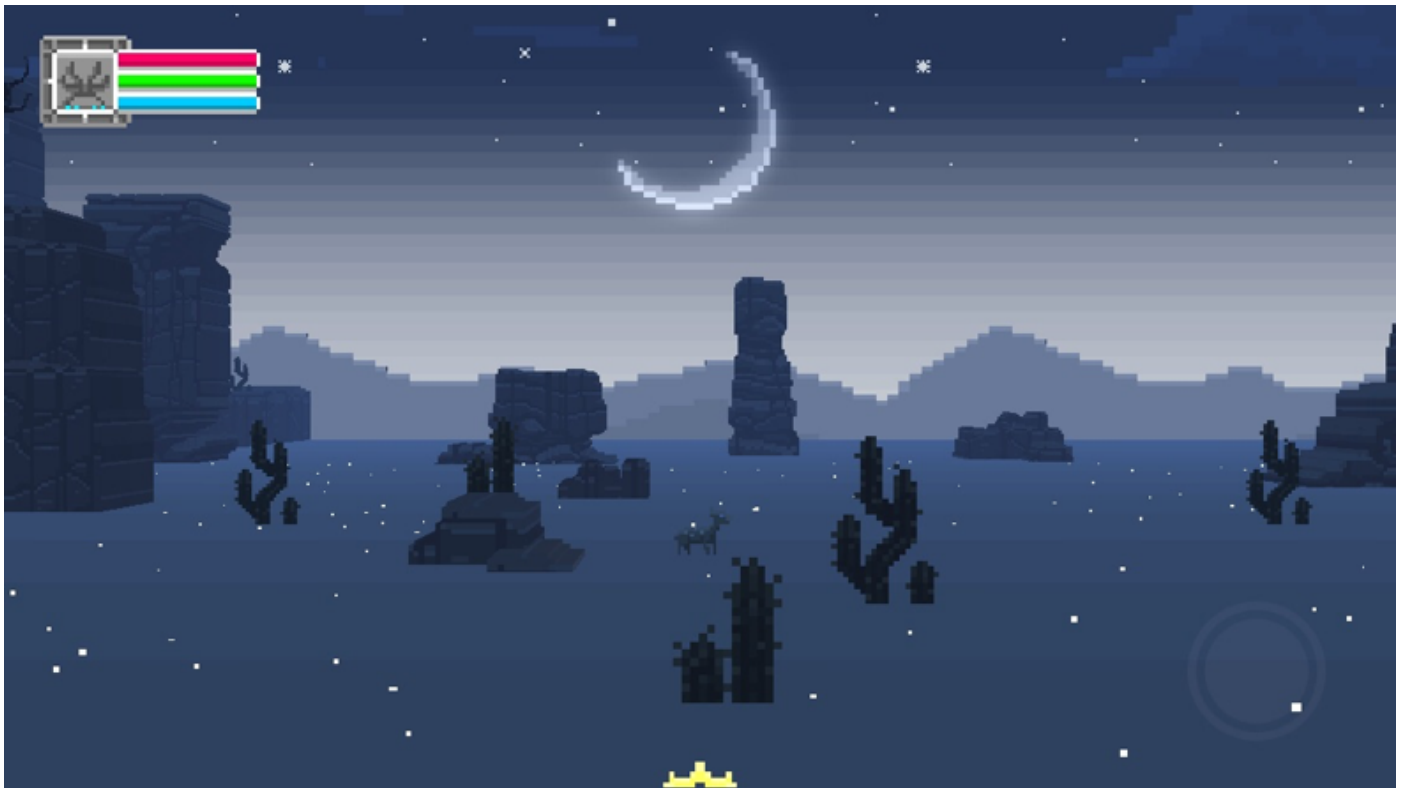
For this transcript, Josh's words will be bolded, while mine will be in regular text. And now, for the feature presentation.

I guess the best place to start is with an introduction. Let people know who you are, what your basic deal is, your favorite pizza toppings. You know, that kind of thing.

Hey, this is Josh from Crescent Moon Games. I've been running this company for... 7 years now I guess. My favorite pizza... it's called the Picasso. It's got all sorts of (stuff) on it. I also like pepperoni.

A safe choice and a weird choice, I like it. I mean, pepperoni? Who does *that*?

I'm no Ninja Turtle, but hey, I can do weird pizza.

On Crescent Moon and How It Started

So what is Crescent Moon all about?

Well, Crescent Moon makes games and publishes games. I guess we probably do more publishing that producing, but we try to keep things interesting. A lot of our games are collaborations with other developers.

Does Crescent Moon have a specialty, or is it anything goes?

Basically, it's whatever I feel like doing. So I guess Crescent Moon just caters to my personal interests in gaming.

So how do those collaborations come about? They pitch you, or you seek people out, or what?

I get lots of submissions, yes, and occasionally I'll approach developers if I see a really neat looking game. Sometimes I fund games, if I have a good idea or if someone has something with a lot of potential.

So, like, how did this whole thing happen? Did you always know you wanted to start a game company?

Well no, I guess I always wanted to get into game development, but I was really into 3d and animation before I did this. Eventually, I decided that I did want to go through with it and make games. The first game I worked on was a game called *Ravensword*, which was a critical success. I think I got really lucky, right place, right time for that.

How did you decide to do that kind of game?

Actually, it started out as something else. Originally, *Ravensword* was going to be sort of like a more high res version of *Hexen*, but I had all of the art assets. I met a programmer, and we started building it for iPhone as a single player RPG. This was at the time when there was nothing out there like it on mobile devices.

Yeah, you were in there very early on.

So it was sort of an instant success. That led to a lot of other games that were successful with various other developers. In the beginning I was publishing and partnering for RPGs, mostly.

You ended up with a reputation for RPGs, but that wasn't even what you were originally setting out to make?

Right, its odd how it ended up like that.

Are you a big fan of RPGs?

I've played a lot of the old school ones, in the old days. And then *Elder Scrolls*, and things like that. But I'm not like the biggest RPG guy or anything. I do love *Zelda* a lot even though its not quite an RPG.

On Favorite Games and Morphite

So what is your game of choice, if not an RPG?

My favorite game is *Metroid*, the original NES version. That game can do no wrong, in my opinion.

The one with no map, right?

Correct, it had no map.

That game gets so much flak now, people say it hasn't aged well. But I think it's still pretty great.

I don't think the Game Boy one did either. Well honestly, its just the memory of it.

I think the Game Boy one had a mini-map (*it doesn't, Josh was correct*), but it was really linear for the most part.

I remember having to make maps for the Game Boy one on paper. I

could remember where to go in the NES one. I think the NES one was so influential to so many genres. Anyway, so yeah I'm big into that sort of game, but I also love open world games. I have a very very short attention span though

So that's why Crescent Moon has so many open world games? Because of *Metroid*?

Exactly! I guess the original *is* open world. It's one big map.

Haha, I don't think anyone would expect that was the origin of those RPGs. But I guess you're doing *Morphite* now, which is very *Metroid Prime*-esque.

Yes, very excited about it. I've been working on it a lot lately. It's got a lot of neat things going on. It's doing procedural worlds, but in more of a Metroidvania-style way. And then, it's got planets that aren't procedural, that are part of the story, so you can go off and explore randomized planets, or you can stick with the story. The story is really how you acquire all of your main upgrades, though.

Oh, that's good to hear. Honestly, when I first heard the concept, I was a little skeptical because I tend to think of *Metroid* as a very guided experience.

Well, the original *Metroid* isn't guided at all, I don't think. In fact, it starts you with not knowing anything.

Like, it's an open world, but it definitely directs you along certain paths.

Well, I suppose that's true. But there's no tutorial, no nothing...

Once you have the bombs the whole thing can break open, of course. But if you don't know the bomb trick, the sandbox is only as big as the developers allow it to be.

Right, and we're making use of those standard Metroidvania tropes but

adding some other things as well. We just recently implemented a hookshot which can be used to go somewhere high up, or to swing, which will be found later in the story, and there are some environmental puzzles in the game, as well.

Is that hookshot inspired by *Zelda* or by the grapple beam from the *Metroid* games? I am all about swinging around in games, I don't know about you.

I suppose its more like the grapple beam in some ways, this is an homage to *Metroid Prime*, after all. One thing that will be controversial is the way we are handling space travel. Although, I think its very well suited for what we are trying to do.

How's that?

It's basically a huge starmap and you can click on a system where you want to go, if you have enough fuel. And then there are random encounters, which makes it a bit more old school in a way.

Kind of a shoot-em-up in space?

Yes, sort of like that. Basically you have your main control panel and then the gun room...

Like Luke manning the gun turret of the Falcon, I suppose?

Yes, that's exactly what it's inspired by. In fact, it has a similar look.

Excellent.

And you can get a bunch of upgrades for it of course, and there are big ships and little ships, and everything in between. We haven't figured out yet how we are going to handle asteroid encounters...

Haha, you sound *really* excited about this game.

Yeah, I am very excited, since *Metroid* is one of my biggest faves.

Would you say this kind of thing was one of your dream projects?

I guess when you get to be able to make a game like this it is sort of a dream – I just don't want to screw it up, so I'm not making any big promises.

Probably a good idea, given how big promises can go at times. But your enthusiasm is clear, at least.

But yeah, I'd say *Metroid* and *Zelda*, *Kid Icarus* and *Mario*, those are my favorite games.

Wow, *Kid Icarus*?

Oh yeah, loved that game and almost tried to make an homage to that as well.

I've tried so many times to like that one, but I just can't wrap my head around it.

Anything made around 1985, 1986, seemed like gold to me. Maybe because I was 10?

No, I think a lot of people like it, so it's not just that you were a kid, probably. But I seem to bounce off it every time.

Okay, so I'm not strange! It's an odd game for sure.

On Business Matters

So, changing gears...what does the average day look like for you?

I get up, get the kids on the bus, or help do that, then go to work like everyone else. I work a pretty normal day, but then I'll work at night, too, and do builds every night for testing.

What does that work involve, usually?

Work depends on what current projects I'm working on, which can mean interfacing with developers to see what things they need. If there are launches coming up, I try to do whatever I can to help the developers out where I can. I wear a variety of hats, from developer communications, PR, marketing, graphics, etc. And then, the whole paperwork side, too.

Lots of paperwork, running a publisher on your own, I imagine. It *is* just you, right?

Yep. So every month around the 1st, I do all of the developer payouts, and that is usually not my favorite day of the month because of figuring out all of the data that comes in. I have it sort of down to a science now though. I had a programmer help me set it up initially.

So you've been around the iOS scene pretty much from the start. What's your read on it?

iOS, or just mobile gaming in general, or?

I guess mobile gaming in general.

Well, it's changed so much over the years. It was a huge gold rush in the beginning, and now it's not so much. Now, you know what to expect. That's not saying you can't make money from games anymore. You just have to work harder and faster!

Have you had to adapt to the changes, or do you find just sticking with what Crescent Moon has always done works well enough?

Actually my philosophy hasn't really changed a whole lot since the beginning, I'm still making what I want, but trying to keep budgets down. So yes, I believe the whole free to play thing killed the market for the type of games that I make, but I got lucky in that I started early.

A lot of people say premium games are dead on mobile. What do you think?

Yes, they are pretty dead, but you can still break even or at least do okay enough to keep going, if you are smart about it. Many devs don't understand this. And I really try to be realistic when I sign up a new developer, and say this is what I expect the game will make. I'm being extremely honest, and they could get upset by that, but hey.

Has that cost you any deals? I mean, that you're aware of.

I'm sure it's cost me lots of deals, every time I open my mouth about realistic revenue expectations. Although, sometimes it works in my favor. Sometimes developers see that I'm being honest about it. I just don't want anyone to hate me later.

Crescent Moon is still mostly mobile-centric, right?

Pretty much, yes. We have had some games on Steam and consoles, but we're mostly mobile.

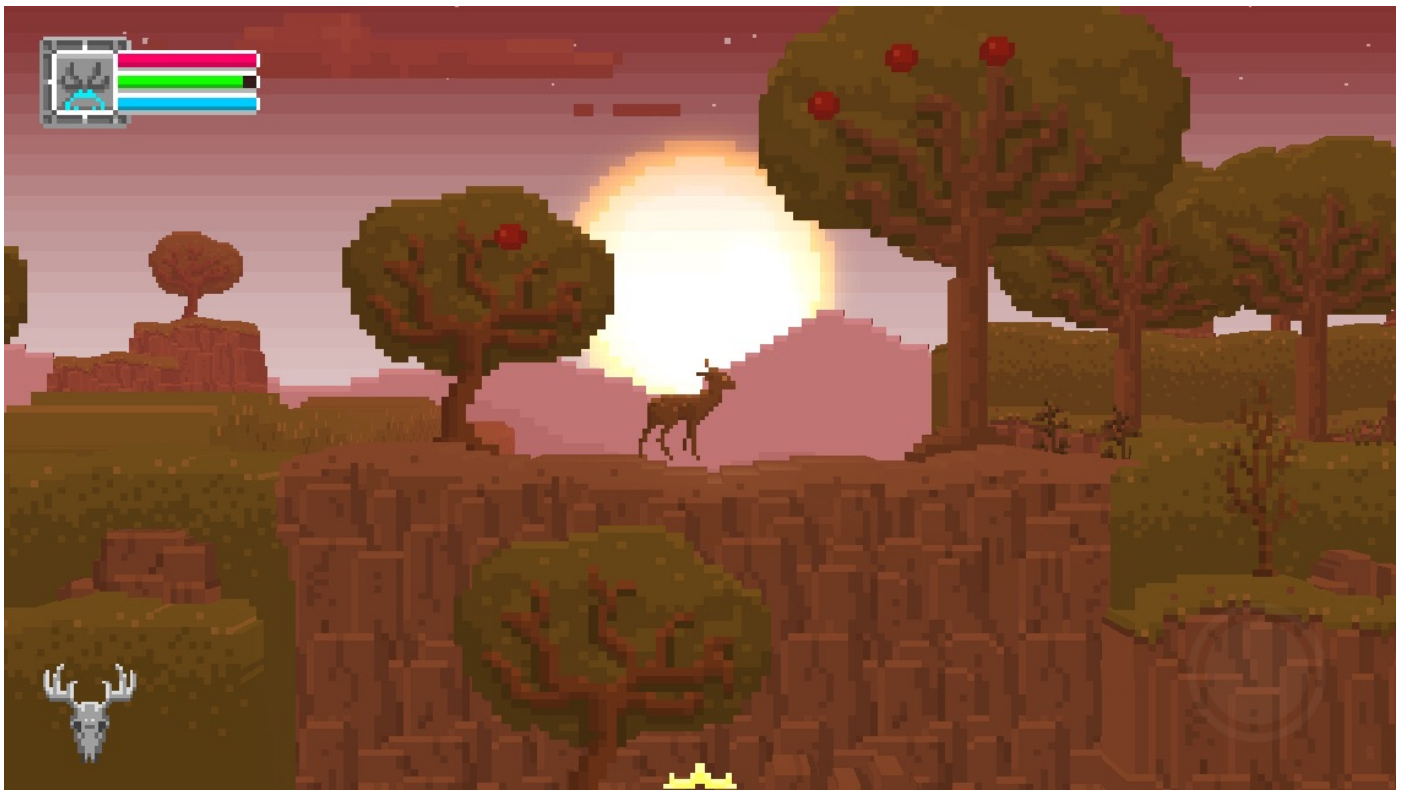A lot of publishers and developers who were once focused on mobile have jumped over to Steam.

Yep, a bunch of them from the early days of mobile, too.

Which games did you put out over there?

Hmm... *Ravensword*, *Neon Shadow* [(Free)](#), *The Deer God* [($4.99)](#), *Mines of Mars* [($4.99)](#), to name a few.

How have they done compared to the mobile versions?

I think *The Deer God* made more on PC than it did on mobile, but that was because it was a PC game at the beginning, even though I did do a mobile tease. Most of the mobile games don't do as well on Steam.

On The Deer God and Family Life

The Deer God was a Kickstarter project, right?

Yes, it was a successful Kickstarter. We've got it on Wii U and Xbox One, and its coming to PS4 soon. It had mixed reviews, but some people liked it!

How was the Kickstarter experience? Some developers have had some issues.

Kickstarter is a pain, mostly because of the rewards. Shipping all of the stuff and keeping track of everything is tricky, it's almost a full time job. I'm not sure if I would do it again or not.

Yeah, that's a common complaint. How about backer expectations? Like you said, *Deer God* got a mixed reception. Was anyone upset?

The backers seemed happy with the game. I didn't have any complaints from any of the backers, actually. I think they got what they thought it

would be. Maybe people on the outside had higher expectations?

Well, that's good, then. I think the game looked absolutely gorgeous, which probably raised expectations.

Yeah, that doesn't help with expectations. Make an ugly game and no one cares. My background is in art, by the way.

That's kind of a Crescent Moon specialty, though, isn't it? Lots of your games are real lookers.

Yeah, and it's kind of funny, we had back to school night for my son last week, and my high school art teacher is still there! She's proud of what we've done, so it's great to see that.

Yeah, she must be proud. I had a similar moment with my high school English teacher when I showed him the first magazine with my name in it.

Oh man, that's awesome. It's a weird feeling of accomplishment, isn't it?

Yeah, it really is. So, did you study art professionally? At university?

Well, I went to the Fashion Institute down in New York, for illustration. It's a state school. I'm from New York, by the way. The funny thing is, the tuition hasn't changed since I went there! It's still like, $5,000 a year, or something.

Wow, that's rare.

It's a great school though, for art and the like.

Do you do any art outside of games? Like, just for your own enjoyment or satisfaction?

I haven't done any personal art in ages. I do music, though, on occasion.

Really?

For a while, I was a musician. Yeah, you can look me up on iTunes under the name Marumari, which is from *Metroid*, of course.

There's *Metroid* again!

I had 5 albums, electronic music.

Do you still do any of that?

A little, here and there. I don't have as much time these days because I have four kids!

Four?

Yep, ages 3, 6, 11, and 14.

Jeez, I have *one* and he feels like a handful at times. How do you swing that?

Well, I have to hand it to my wife. If she had a job, we'd be screwed. I didn't know you had one, I don't think!

Yeah, mine is 17. He's in his dark, brooding phase.

Oh whoa, yeah, I'm not quite there yet. Does he play goth RPGs?

No, mostly *World of Tanks*.

Oh, okay. That's interesting.

He doesn't really like RPGs, oddly enough. Just *Pokemon* and *Etrian Odyssey*.

Well, my son doesn't typically like what I like either, so that sounds about right.

What kind of games is your son into?

He's into any of the really big AAA games. And *Minecraft*. He's starting to get into modding Call of Duty, and things like that.

What does he think about his dad making games?

I don't know, I think he's just used to it. I show him new things that I do to see what he's interested in. He did say he thought Morphite was pretty cool, but he typically doesn't like my games.

Ouch. But I guess that makes sense, too. The relationship between a kid and their parents' work can be weird.

He's hard to please but that's okay. He's very honest at least about what he really likes.

Well, that makes him a trustworthy tester, if nothing else, right?

Yes, when I can get him for testing, he'll tell me everything.

Well, I think we've got plenty to fill up the column with, so if you have anything you want to throw out there before we wrap up, now's the time.

Okay, I was just thinking about where we go from here. I kind of feel bad not mentioning the recent games.

Go ahead, plug away!

So, two games we've released recently that have been pretty well received, on your site and others, are *Atomic Super Lander* and *Legend of the Skyfish*.

I think you've been on fire recently, but maybe that's just me.

That's good to hear! I hate when I'm in a bad streak. Which I have had.

That game which shall not be named!

I won't go there.

You addressed it plenty on that one podcast, so stick with the new stuff, because it's great.

So *Atomic Super Lander*, a really neat mash-up of *Lunar Lander* and... a platformer, I suppose. The developer bitWeird likened it to *Super Mario Bros. 2*. I never said that, but I can see the influence.

I can see it, actually.

It's got some great animation in it, and it's pretty hilarious. Actually, my favorite part of the game is when you die. It will say "High Score", and then play this amazing music. I don't know why, it just gets me every time. Then, *Legend of the Skyfish*. I hate to say that it's like *Zelda*...

It's *Zelda*-esque.

It sort of looks like *Zelda*, but it's not really like *Zelda*.

Like, if you condensed Zelda into just environmental puzzles, it's sort of like that, I think?

Pretty much, yes. Level-based environmental puzzles. Which I think works well with mobile. And it works well with the fishing pole as a hookshot.

I love the fishing pole being the main tool.

I think the main character is pretty sharp, too. I wouldn't mind seeing another one, a Skyfish 2. I guess that depends on how things go.

It's one of those games that gives me the warm fuzzies when I play it. Can't really explain why, though.

It does have an overall Nintendo-y feel to it.

Yes, it feels like it came from the era where that sort of single-screen puzzle game was big.

Oh yes, well, original *Zelda*, where the screen scrolled over.

Yeah, or things like *Lolo* or *Kickle Cubicle* even.

Oh yeah, those games. Do you remember the game *Athena*?

Yes!

That's a weird one I've been thinking about lately, I'm not sure why.

I think I have the Japanese cartridge laying around here somewhere.

I might have to play it again.

The Japanese cart is bright pink.

Oh wow, awesome. Anyway, last thing. So, the future of Crescent Moon. We're going to get *Morphite* out hopefully by the of the year, we'll see. And we might have two more games coming that I'm publishing, possibly. Nothing finalized yet, but definitely Crescent Moon style stuff. And then after that, the sky is wide open.

I'm obligated to ask: How's *Ravensword* coming?

Haaa... well, sadly, it's been on hold. You mean *Legacy*, right?

Yes.

The main artist/designer of that game has a full-time job, so a few months back, I had to put it on hold. But there's still a chance I could pick that up early next year, with a new guy.

Ahh. Well, I think I speak for most when I say that it's okay to take your time with that to get it right.

Seems like a decent amount of interest in that game...

The art style is super cool.

I would like to get it done, but it has to be good.

Yes, I think that's the only route to success these days in that genre.

We'll see how it goes.

Like, not even just "good"...

Yeah, I hear you. *Aralon 2* ($4.99), for instance, I think you gave it a good review...

...because now you're competing with stuff like Bioware games, and so on.

Well, I wouldn't say I'm competing, even though I guess I am.

Well, I suppose in terms of where RPG fans can spend their dollars.

Yeah, I know what you mean.

When you did the first *Ravensword*, the big fish weren't really playing yet.

This is true, and it's the reason it was a success.

But now there are so many choices...

There are.

So it must be harder.

But we have a fanbase now.

True enough!

I know if we did a new *Ravensword*, it would do pretty well.

I think you're right. Well, thanks for giving us your time, Josh.

Always a pleasure, thanks for having me.

Thanks again to Josh for agreeing to be patient zero for this idea. Now, what do you all think? I want to hear your opinions about this kind of article so I know what kind of adjustments I should make in the future. The **Reload** is nothing without all of you, so share your thoughts by commenting below. As for me, I'll be back next week with a regular **RPG Reload**. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload: *Overlive* ($2.99)